

THE COMPASS

GETTING THROUGH THE DAY: Practical Wisdom from JAMES

Part 1:

Trust on Trial

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I'm sure this has never happened to you, has it — where somebody promises you something, and then the big moment comes, and they don't deliver.

Yeah, it happens all the time.

And your visceral response is, "I trusted you!"

Sometimes it's actually a serious thing, even with legal ramifications.

Sometimes there's a question about whether there should be a lawsuit.

Somebody will say, "You know, you could take that to court, and you would win."

You look at all the cases in court at any given moment, and an awful lot of them are about broken trust.

Trust — and trials.

We see courtroom dramas on TV and in the movies, and we use the phrase "trial by jury" as almost a patriotic phrase — it's one of the foundations of democracy — but when it comes right down to it, in real life, we don't want to go trial, do we?

It's expensive, it's stressful, it eats up your life for however many weeks or months or years it takes to resolve — basically, it's just a lot easier to settle out of court.

Plea bargain. Strike a deal with your opponent. Avoid court. Avoid a trial.

Studies show there are more criminal cases than ever — but fewer trials.

People are avoiding trials.

They don't want to go to trial; they want to settle.

Well, in this series, we're journeying through the Bible book of James, and you know what? James offers advice about trials.

He actually suggests that our regular everyday daily troubles really are a lot like courtroom trials.

Think about the biggest problem in your life right now — and let's see if what James says about trials applies to your situation.

We can see, as we read through the book of James, that James was a real-life everyday kind of guy.

He was not a heavy thinker; he was not a philosopher or an orator or a very sophisticated writer.

He used ordinary everyday examples. He spoke in simple terms about the stuff that people go through every day of their lives.

Linguistic scholars have studied the book of James and found that he writes an awful lot like someone else from that era: Jesus himself.

In fact, they say, the book of James sounds a lot like the Sermon on the Mount.

You know, it actually appears from the scriptural record that James may not have believed that Jesus was really the Messiah until after Jesus came back from the dead.

So James knew what it was to be doubtful about this whole supernatural thing, this whole faith thing, this whole idea of God being active in people's lives.

James knew what it was to feel that internal tug-of-war between what God seems to be saying, and what your own brain seems to be saying.

He knew what it meant to have to sort out the theory of God's design from the practicalities of actually living it.

James recognized that life is full of messes and mishaps, and we have to get through them somehow.

In fact, 2,000 years ago, when the early church fell into conflict over "how people could really get right with God," and the leaders all gathered in Jerusalem to try and sort it out, we read in **Acts 15** that the various parties stood up and made their cases.

After everybody had had their say, James gave the last word.

And what you hear, when you read his remarks, is the heart of a normal guy who doesn't put much stock in fancy terminology or complicated formulas, someone who just appreciates the grace that God had given him, and he wants to share it with other people however he can.

Here's what he says: *We shouldn't make it difficult for people who are turning to God.*

He seems to be saying, Look, life is difficult enough.

It's hard enough for human beings to get past their own hang-ups and find God.

Let's not make it any harder than it is. Let's make it easy.

This is the guy, most scholars agree, who wrote the book of James.

It's actually a letter, which he wrote specifically to his own Jewish countrymen, but not to the guys who are attending his church every week in Jerusalem; he writes to the Jews who have turned to Christ but who are scattered across the world, living in other countries, far from their spiritual homeland.

He's writing to people who have hardship built in to their lives.

People who are in the minority.

People who in some cases are being persecuted for their faith.

People who in some areas are unpopular among their Gentile neighbors because they're Jewish, and unpopular with their Jewish neighbors because they're Christian!

And people who, along with all of these troubles, every single day, are going through the normal junk of life just like you and me.

They're getting a sore throat, their spouse is making them crazy, their milk cow dies, they get into a hassle with the boss at work.

So what does James say to them, and to us?

James 1:2

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

The word we translate as *trials* is actually a word that means, literally, *a putting to proof* — Strong's Greek Dictionary explains it as proving something is good by experimenting with it, or proving something is bad by experiencing it. The implication of this word is that you're proving something through adversity.

And our English language doesn't really hit the nail on the head with this word *whenever*, either.

This makes it sound almost as if we have an option — like, if we're lucky, we won't face trials of many kinds.

But the actual word is *when*. Not *whenever*, not *if*. *When*.

I am going to face trials of many kinds. That's life.

The question isn't whether I will face them, but what to do about it *when* I face them.

And come on, what James is recommending here doesn't quite seem to make sense — we're supposed to consider it pure joy as we face all these trials of life?

This is not logical. It is not normal. In fact, it seems like James is dreaming.

Or just reciting some religious platitude that we can engrave on a plaque and hang in our living room so we can look holy.

But in fact, James is not pretending. And he's not asking us to pretend.

It's not fun to be in a trial.

He says *consider it* pure joy. Look at it *as if* it's a good thing.

When you're toting up the good things that happened to you today in one column, and the bad things that happened to you today in another column, put your trials over on the good side.

Why?

Because, he says in the very next line:

3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Here, when he says *testing*, he's actually using the word for a trial, to see if something is trustworthy.

He says this is like putting your faith on trial.

Let me tell you what this means to me, personally.

I've decided I believe what God says. I don't understand everything he says, but I trust that he's telling me the truth when he says I need him, and Christ's sacrifice was for me, and I'm OK with him because I've accepted that gift.

I trust he's telling the truth when he says that he will work out even the junk in my life in keeping with his best for me.

I trust he's telling the truth when he says he'll walk with me and strengthen me and comfort me even when life really, really hurts.

That's my faith: trusting God to be telling the truth.

But now, along comes a tragedy.

Someone I love dies.

Someone misunderstands me and starts an ugly rumor about me.

My job goes to India.

I get sick and need an operation and even then they don't know if I'll be all right.

James says my faith is on trial.

Am I just mouthing the words “I trust God,” or am I really living them?
 Sit your faith down at the defense table, and let the trial begin.
 Was it right to trust God to be telling the truth?
 Is he comforting me in the middle of this crisis?
 Is he working his plan through it all?
 Is he giving me his best the way he promised?

Every time I face trouble, my faith goes on trial.
 And I face trouble every day, more or less.
 It’s a lifelong process.
 Life is uneven. Life is difficult. Life is a problem-magnet.
 But this endless process — putting my faith on trial, day after day — develops
 perseverance.

Now frankly, James here is trying to sell me something else I don’t really want.
 I don’t want troubles, I don’t want my faith on trial, and I don’t really care to develop
 perseverance.

The actual word he uses here implies cheerful endurance, or endurance that’s filled with
 hope.

It’s not just gritting your teeth and hanging on.
 It’s hanging in there quietly, patiently, trusting for the future.

James says this ongoing process — putting my faith on trial, day after day — will
 develop this kind of cheerful, quiet strength in me.
 If I learn to consider my problems as trials of my faith — if I learn to look at them this
 way — I’ll develop perseverance.
 If I don’t learn to see my problems this way — if I blame God, or blame people around
 me, or blame myself, or focus on how to avoid them, or whatever — I won’t get
 the benefit.

I don’t think this is just a matter of shrugging my shoulders and saying, “OK, from now
 on, I’m going to see my problems as trials of my faith.”

I don’t think it’s that simple.

What happens in a TRIAL?

There’s an 1 accusation, someone is accusing the defendant of something.

There’s 2 evidence trotted out for consideration.

There’s time to ponder, 3 deliberation about the case.

And there’s a 4 judgment.

It’s a process, and it’s relatively complex. It has to be entered into thoughtfully.

So when I get blindsided by some problem, I have to decide to put my faith on trial.

I have to stop and say to myself, “Whoa, wait a minute.

I’m crying, or I’m furious, or I’m sick with worry, or whatever — but I need to bang the
 gavel, call myself to order, and begin the trial.

What is the accusation against my faith?

The accuser, Satan, is telling me that my faith is worthless in this situation.

That I’m a fool to trust God.

That I'm crazy to believe God is working his plan in this mess.
That I'm nuts to lean back and rest, and let God comfort me.

But what's the evidence?

The evidence in my life is — God hasn't failed me. I've failed him sometimes, but he hasn't failed me.

He has proven himself trustworthy.

I am still here, I am still alive, I am still his child. I sense his love. I see his provision in my life.

I can think of many specific examples of how he has grown me and shaped me and blessed me even when my situation looked hopeless.

Even when I have been unworthy. Even when I have failed.

I can think of many times when God has comforted me, and gotten me through something, and I've come out on the other end stronger, or wiser, or just plain alive when I thought I was going to die.

That's the evidence.

Now let me take a little time to ponder this, to deliberate. deliberation

I don't have to rush to judgment.

If it takes me a little time to sift through the evidence before I decide that my faith is sound, that's OK.

Nor do I have to blindly wave my hands and go "Glory hallelujah" in some emotional frenzy and say "I'm joyful! I have the victory!" when that's not my reality.

I can take some time. I can hurt for a while. I can cry for a while. I can be confused or worried or whatever.

But if I will keep reviewing the case, I'll probably (judgment) find in favor of the defendant.

And over time — over the years, as I face problem after problem, as we all do — if I train myself in this approach ... if I take my faith to trial again and again ... I will get more in the habit of it.

When another problem comes along, I can go to trial more readily.

I can lay out the evidence more easily.

I can deliberate more quickly.

So I can come to a judgment — I can put my problem in its proper perspective — I can rule in favor of continuing to trust God — and I can get on with my life.

James didn't just stop there, with perseverance; and I'm glad he didn't.

Perseverance itself isn't the point. That's not all God wants to see me acquiring.

Growing patient is not an end in itself.

James goes on to say:

4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

This system, this process, has an outcome. It has a goal.

I'm going to grow up. I'll be mature.

In those areas where I feel weak, I'll see more and more evidence of him making me stronger.

In those areas where I feel I've been wronged, I'll see him changing my priorities, so that more and more, I'll be able to see the difference between what's really important and what's really not, what's worth being offended by and what's not, and spend my emotional energy accordingly.

The areas of my life where I feel loss, those are the areas where God will fill me up. I'll find more and more evidence of him meeting my need. Not necessarily giving me everything I want, but filling me up from the inside out, giving me the kind of satisfaction in life that doesn't come from the outside.

But I have to let it happen.

This statement isn't literally "Perseverance must finish its work." Literally, James writes,

"But let perseverance have its perfect work...."

We have to *let* perseverance have its way, let it have its effect.

We have to keep trudging forward through life, encountering problems, putting our faith on trial, and trusting God — and as we do, it will gradually pay off.

Typically, I want solutions now. I want God to bail me out this instant.

But this is unproductive.

Because God doesn't see my problems this way.

He sees a problem heading in my direction and he says to himself, "Opportunity knocks!

Doug is going to have the chance to really live in the realm of trusting me!

He is going to come out of this with a clearer, stronger sense of how totally I am caring for him."

I say, with a smirk, "Oh wow, this is great."

But God says, with a twinkle in his eye, "Oh! Wow! This is *great!*"

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You've probably heard the old, old story of a king in a remote, primitive land who had a close friend, with whom he had grown up.

The friend had a habit of looking at every situation that ever occurred in his life — positive or negative — and remarking, "This is good!"

One day the king and his friend were out on a hunting expedition.

The friend would load and prepare the guns for the king.

But the friend had apparently done something wrong in preparing one of the guns, so the king took the gun from his friend, fired it — and blew his own thumb off.

The friend examined the horrible wound and declared, as usual, "This is good!"

To which the king replied, "No, this is *not* good!" — and he proceeded to send his friend to jail.

About a year later, the king was hunting in an area that he should have known to stay clear of.

Cannibals captured him and took them to their village.

They tied his hands, stacked some wood, set up a stake, and bound him to the stake.

But as they came near to set fire to the wood, they noticed that the king was missing a thumb.

They were superstitious; they never ate anyone who was less than whole.

So they untied the king and sent him on his way.

As the king returned home, he couldn't help but remember the day he had lost his thumb; and he felt so guilty about how he had treated his friend!

So he went immediately to the jail.

"You were right," he said, "it was good that my thumb was blown off."

And he told his friend everything that had just happened.

Finally he said to his friend, "I am so sorry for sending you to jail for so long. It was bad for me to do this."

"No," his friend replied, as usual, "this is good!"

"What do you mean, 'This is good'?" the king said. "How could it be good that I sent my friend to jail for a year?"

"If I had *not* been in jail," his friend replied, "I would have been with you."

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

God says he is good.

He says he loves us.

He says he is caring for us.

Let's trust him to be telling the truth.